

The Land to Those Who Work It:

Land Reform and Socialist Agriculture
in the German Democratic Republic



The German Democratic Republic (Deutsche Demokratische Republik, DDR) was a socialist state founded in East Germany in 1949 as a democratic, anti-fascist reaction to the Second World War and the subsequent restoration of monopoly capitalism in West Germany. The DDR represented a new Germany – one in which the land was redistributed, the means of production socialised, agricultural production organised into cooperatives, and significant advances made in gender equality, education, healthcare, and other areas of society. The DDR also cultivated friendly and close-knit economic relationships with other socialist states and exercised political and material solidarity with countries and movements fighting for their independence in Latin America, Asia, and Africa. In this series, we use the German acronym DDR instead of the English acronym GDR specifically because it has become a positive point of reference in many parts of the world and especially for countries in the Global South.

After the reunification of Germany in 1990, the DDR's economy was dismantled and treated as a prototype for the shock therapy austerity measures that were soon imposed on other countries – not just the former socialist states. At the same time, the DDR was politically, judicially, and morally delegitimised. The publications in this series are a rejection of the narrative propagated by enemies of socialism, both new and old, that the demise of the DDR – and other socialist projects – proves the inevitable failure of any socialist policy and economy.

Through the series Studies on the DDR, the Internationale Forschungsstelle DDR (International Research Centre DDR), and Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research seek to stimulate a renewed engagement with the history, achievements, and principles of the DDR. After all, millions of people around the world are still fighting for advancements that were once a given in the socialist system of the DDR but were lost with its downfall.

1. Introduction

The state of contemporary global agriculture and food production urgently begs for alternatives. If the global food supply were distributed fairly and equally, everyone would have enough to eat. Yet, in 2025, 645 million people – roughly one out of thirteen – worldwide went hungry.¹ Prices are further inflated through financial speculation on food, raw materials, and land, perversely ensuring that profits are reaped not only from basic goods needed for survival but also from growing rates of hunger as rising commodity prices themselves become targets of speculative trading.²

While just over one-third of the world's food continues to be produced by small farmers,* massive agricultural corporations such as the ABCD Group – Archer Daniels Midland, Bunge, Cargill, and Louis Dreyfus – dominate global food cultivation, processing, marketing, and distribution.³ The result is that companies like those in the ABCD Group have a near monopoly over advanced agricultural technology and increasing control over globally centralised production and processing chains. This concentration of land ownership and the means of food production reinforces patterns established during the colonial era, driving monocultures, one-sided trade relations, and land evictions. These dynamics, in turn, exacerbate small-scale subsistence farming, extreme exploitation of agricultural workers, poverty, hunger, environmental destruction, and rural maldevelopment. While the development of capitalist relations in agricultural technologies and science has unleashed significant potential for food production, this has clearly not been used to satisfy people's most basic need for food.

Decades after the dissolution of the DDR, we look back at its achievements – and what is to be learned from its shortcomings – for answers. In the DDR's mere forty-five years of existence, the conditions in rural areas changed fundamentally. This change took place in three stages:

- The first stage (1945–1948) was during the shift in the balance of power in East Germany after the Second World War, which marked the decisive starting point for the DDR's agricultural transformation. During this period, land reform was implemented that broke up the centuries-old land ownership structures in the countryside. This process of democratisation created the first framework for new relations of production based on cooperation.
- The second stage (1952–1960) was characterised by the *Genossenschaftsbewegung* (cooperative movement), which was able to resolve the contradictions between modern technology and small-scale production in the interests of farmers and agricultural workers without ruining, displacing, or subordinating them

* Five out of six farms in the world have an area of less than two hectares and – despite accounting for only around 12% of total agricultural land – produce roughly 35% of the world's food. See Sarah K. Lowder, Marco V. Sánchez, and Raffaele Bertini, 'Which Farms Feed the World and Has Farmland Become More Concentrated?', *World Development* 142 (1 June 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2021.105455>.

to the interests of big business, as occurs under capitalism. By the same token, agricultural cooperatives also provided the rural population with previously unattained social and cultural rights and opportunities.

- The third and final stage (1970s–1980s), built on the foundation established during the previous periods, saw the development of large agricultural production networks and deepening cooperative relationships between the various stages of production, from primary production to processing and distribution.

The DDR's agricultural reform was among the most successful and comprehensive programmes in the country's short history, transforming the reality of the peasantry from feudal-like working and living conditions (including economic and political subordination and cultural deprivation) into one marked by confidence, democracy, cultural vibrance, and highly productive industrial agriculture.

Every country and region has its own history and conditions that must be carefully analysed and for which unique solutions must be found. Nevertheless, the decisions made in the DDR's agricultural sector offer practical insights for an alternative to capitalist market competition and profit-seeking. This study aims to contribute to contemporary debates on the prospects of socialist agriculture by examining the historical process that fundamentally changed the social structures and ways of working and thinking in the East German countryside. It is not possible to cover all aspects of the DDR's agriculture in this study; important questions around forestry, ecology, agriscience, internationalism, and the inner workings of the Democratic Farmers' Party (Demokratische Bauernpartei Deutschlands, DBD) could only be touched upon in passing and certainly deserve to be explored further in the future.

This study is structured chronologically, following the concrete historical development of agriculture in Germany: first the centuries-old feudal yoke imposed on Germany's peasantry, then the period of land reform and, finally, the transition to a cooperative organisation of agriculture and large-scale industrial agricultural production.

2. The Prussian Path to Capitalist Agriculture and the Rise of Fascism

German agriculture transitioned from feudal to bourgeois-capitalist conditions during the nineteenth century, relatively late compared to other European countries like England and France.* Even then, it only occurred very gradually and without a radical overthrow of the feudal aristocracy, who retained their hold over the land. The unification of Germany into a modern bourgeois nation-state was brought about by the political manoeuvring and warmongering of the Prussian ruling class, led by Otto von Bismarck and Kaiser Wilhelm I.

During this period – referred to in Marxist literature as the ‘Prussian path to capitalism’ – the emergence of the capitalist mode of production was tightly bound to relations of feudal subordination. The living and legal conditions of the various peasant working masses changed, but their economic and social dependency on the landed nobility remained. A class of ‘free’ small and medium peasants** emerged, most of whom were heavily indebted to the landlords. Servants and sharecroppers who used to be landless farmhands for the lord of the manor now crystallised as a new class of agricultural workers. The feudal landlord himself became the owner of a sort of proto-agribusiness. Village life continued to be shaped by the large landowners, who maintained an economically and politically dominant role well into the twentieth century that was upheld by laws, customs, traditions, and new capitalist dependency relations. Backward, almost medieval-era conditions thus prevailed in the countryside.

Feudal laws, which had ostensibly been abolished in 1919 after the fall of the German monarchy, remained a de facto reality for agricultural workers and servants who were prohibited from organising politically or in trade unions such as in the German Agricultural Workers’ Association (Deutscher Landarbeiterverband, founded in 1909). Excerpts from the Prussian Servants’ Regulations, which was established in the early 1800s, reveal how labourers were still deprived of basic rights:

Paragraph 77: ‘If the servants provoke the lord’s anger through improper behaviour and are treated by him in return with insulting words or petty abuse, the servants may not seek legal redress’.

Paragraph 79: ‘Except in cases where the life and health of the servant is in present and unavoidable danger due to maltreatment by the lordship, he is not permitted to actively resist the lord’.

Paragraph 74: ‘Without prior knowledge and permission of the lordship, servants may not leave the house, even for their own affairs’.

* Serfdom was de facto abolished in England in the late fourteenth century and in France in the eighteenth century.

** In this study, ‘farmer’ and ‘peasant’ are used interchangeably to refer to self-employed owners or tenants of land (in German: *Bauern*). This reflects the historical language of the DDR and avoids an artificial separation between terms that are treated synonymously in the source material. ‘Agricultural workers’ refers to landless wage labourers who worked for farmers on a contract basis.

Paragraph 76: 'The servants are to accept the orders of the lordship and their reprimands with deference and modesty'.⁴

From the early nineteenth to the twentieth century, Germany's economic base underwent a fundamental shift from an agro-industrial to an industrial economy. The population nearly tripled, from around 18 million in 1800 to over 52 million in 1900.⁵ While most Germans lived in the countryside in the early nineteenth century, from 1871 to 1910 – in the wake of the urban migration that accompanied capitalist development – the percentage of the population living in cities (defined at the time as having more than 2,000 residents) rose from 36% to 60%.⁶ Meanwhile, from 1882 to 1907, the share of workers engaged in agriculture and forestry dropped from 42.5% to 28.6%. A large class of landless agricultural workers soon outnumbered the owners and tenants of farms in rural areas. In 1907, large estates (greater than 100 hectares) employed an average of 51 labourers, and one-third of the 9.5 million people working in agriculture were wage labourers.⁷ Agricultural wage labourers were concentrated in the areas east of the Elbe River, where large agricultural enterprises were most widespread. Foreign seasonal workers, especially from the Polish regions, were particularly exploited. In the mid-nineteenth century, there was a significant concentration of land ownership: less than 1% of landowners held more than 40% of arable land, while around 80% of farmers owned less than 12%, consisting of individual plots under 7.5 hectares.⁸

Conditions in the German countryside developed unevenly throughout the nineteenth century because of the country's territorial fragmentation into many small states. West of the Rhine River, serfdom and indentured servitude had been swept away with the French Revolution of 1789. In central and southern Germany, between the Rhine and the Elbe Rivers, small and medium-scale farmers worked parcels of land with leases to large landowners. But when serfdom was abolished by law in the areas east of the Elbe (which would later make up much of the DDR's territory), peasants were forced to compensate their former masters. Ultimately, to be emancipated from feudal obligations and duties, peasants paid a total of 1.8 billion marks and had to give 425,169 hectares of land to the *Junkers*, Prussia's landed nobility.⁹ This intensified the already greatly unequal distribution of arable land and gave rise to the large, landed estates that shaped the East German countryside prior to 1945.

Furthermore, the Junkers east of the Elbe were a central pillar of the reactionary, militaristic Prussian state and alongside influential industrial monopolists, would later become the facilitators of Hitler's fascism. As historian Siegfried Kuntsche points out, the aristocratic Junker class used the key positions it retained in Germany's military and state bureaucracy to openly support reactionary forces during the Weimar era (1919–1933), with 'representatives of several long-established noble families join[ing] the Nazi movement' as far back as the early 1920s.¹⁰ In the region of Mecklenburg, one of the heartlands of the Junkers, a quarter of all landowners became members of the Nazi party.¹¹ Half of the generals in the high command of the fascist Wehrmacht (armed forces) came from nobility.¹² During the Second World War, Junkers

used their already dominant role in village social life to promote the theft of Eastern European land, pitting peasants against their counterparts in the East and diverting attention from the Junkers' own history of appropriating peasant land.

Under Hitler (1933–1945), German fascism pursued a policy of the complete subjugation of peasants and the rural population to enable its imperialist war policy. Organisations and unions of agricultural labourers were banned. Everyone involved in the production, processing, and trade of agricultural produce was forced to become a member of the Nazi Reich Food Estate, or *Reichsnährstand*, under the command of large landowners. A total delivery obligation was enforced during the war, and peasants' savings and credit balances were confiscated to pay for the cost of war. The fascist state compensated for the rapid decline in crop yields during the war years by imposing delivery quotas on produce from occupied countries in Eastern Europe and enforcing a merciless starvation policy against local populations. Only through the barbaric exploitation of millions of forced labourers were the fascists able to keep German agriculture afloat.

Nazi Germany's wartime policies created a major setback for the country's agricultural development. As early as the mid-1930s, the war economy was prioritised over agriculture. 'If necessary, we will be able to cope without butter, but never without cannons', as Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels put it in 1936.¹³ The damage incurred by the war left machinery and large tracts of land in ruin and livestock decimated. This was especially true in East Germany, where the fascists sought to ensure that nothing could be left behind for the Red Army and proceeded to systematically slaughter livestock and raze the soil – what Gerhard Grüneberg, the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED) agriculture secretary from 1960 to 1981, described as the continuation of the Nazis' 'criminal scorched-earth policy'.¹⁴

3. Land Reform: Junkers' Lands in Peasants' Hands

Post-War Destruction and Hunger

East Germany was the main European front for the final battles of the Second World War, leaving large areas of agricultural land, facilities, and processing plants in ruin; means of transport practically non-existent; and production capacities set back by decades. As the Red Army advanced on German territory, many Junkers fled to West Germany, often taking their livestock, technical equipment, and other private possessions with them and thus further worsening the supply situation. Swine livestock was reduced to 20% of its pre-war levels, cattle to 66%, and poultry to 25%.¹⁵ As a result of all these factors, the domestic food industry collapsed completely in 1945.



Image 1. Farmers remove debris and stones from a field in the East German village of Podelzig, which was almost destroyed in the final days of the Second World War, 1945.

After the war, Germany was divided into four military occupation zones. The Eastern Zone (known as the Soviet Occupation Zone, SOZ) was under the control of the Soviet Military Administration, and the Western Zones were controlled by the United States, the United Kingdom, and France. Berlin, which was located in the SOZ, was similarly divided

among the four allied powers. In the SOZ, the German Administration for Agriculture and Forestry (Deutsche Verwaltung für Land- und Forstwirtschaft) was set up to deal with the urgent task of securing the first post-war harvest. On 18 June 1945, the Soviet Military Administration abolished the Nazis' total delivery obligation by passing Order No. 40, which established delivery targets for grain, potatoes, vegetables, and oilseeds, followed shortly thereafter by Order No. 18, on 29 July 1945, which put an end to the compulsory delivery of livestock products. These were among the first measures implemented that promoted a democratic agricultural policy and helped spark the peasantry's interest in increasing production.

Soon thereafter, a two-price system was established: farmers were paid a lower price for produce that they were required to sell to the state to ensure that there was sufficient food for the population and a higher price for surplus produce, which they could sell freely. Administrative bodies, trade unions, and newly permitted parties – which were united in the anti-fascist democratic bloc – called on the population to help with the harvest. Engineers and industrial workers formed crews to repair agricultural machinery as townspeople went into the fields to help with the harvest and peasant committees were formed in the villages to coordinate the work, combat hoarding, and ensure that the population received their food rations.

The Land Reform Programme

The Soviet Occupation Zone

During the war, German communists in exile in the Soviet Union developed a land reform programme for the post-war period. Edwin Hoernle was one of the main architects of this programme. Hoernle, an agricultural expert and communist parliamentarian during the Weimar era, returned from exile in May 1945 and took over as president of the Administration for Agriculture and Forestry (the main administrative position for agriculture and forestry in the newly created German Economic Commission). The meticulous planning and viability of this programme garnered support among the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) and its base, which in June 1945 issued a public appeal for democratic land reform under the slogan *Junkerland in Bauernhand!* ('Junkers' lands in peasants' hands!') and campaigned for a swift deliberation and implementation by the four-party bloc. On 22 August 1945, the KPD's central committee adopted a concrete proposal to implement a land reform programme by the end of the year. Its central points were:

- 1.** To expropriate, without compensation, large private estates (over 100 hectares in size).
- 2.** To expropriate, without compensation, all property belonging to Nazi functionaries and war criminals, regardless of size.
- 3.** To create a state land fund consisting of the expropriated property as well as state-owned assets.

4. To allocate the largest part of the land fund as private property in small, individually owned plots (five hectares in the case of high- and medium-quality soil and eight to ten hectares in the case of poor- and very poor-quality soil).
5. To distribute livestock and basic production equipment to 'new farmers', i.e. former agricultural workers, landless peasants, or refugees.
6. To transfer tractors and large agricultural machinery as well as workshops and agricultural processing plants to peasants' mutual aid committees for collective use.¹⁶



Image 2. On 11 September 1945, three municipalities near Dresden, East Germany, expropriated and divided up the former Royal Manor. The sign (front left) reads 'Free farmer on free soil', and the banner (upper right) reads 'The master's time is up'.

The land reform initiative was promoted in a variety of settings, from the press to churches and party committees, and found increasing support among the population.

Hoernle and the KPD argued that compensating the large estate owners for their expropriated land would be irresponsible given the supply shortages and general economic destitution. As they pointed out, by no means would large estate owners be reduced to beggars if their estates were expropriated without compensation, as they still retained their private belongings and accumulated wealth. Furthermore, this was considered an appropriate punishment for war crimes and an act of historical justice.¹⁷

Since the Christian Democratic Union of Germany and Liberal Democratic Party of Germany – both members of the anti-fascist democratic bloc alongside the Social Democratic Party of Germany and the Communist Party of Germany – opposed the proposal for expropriation without compensation, there was a series of lengthy negotiations before the legal ordinances calling for expropriation without compensation were ultimately passed by the five state governments within the Soviet Occupation Zone in early September 1945.



Image 3. A 1945 poster from the KPD's central committee which reads: 'Away with Junker rule: Junkers' lands in peasants' hands'.

The Western Zone

Popular pressure and the approval of land reform in East Germany in early September 1945 prompted the US and British military adminis-

trations in the West to draw up legal proposals for land reform in their zones. Yet the legal provisions they drafted offered politicians and large landowners enough leeway to ultimately prevent redistribution measures or to delay them until the balance of political power had shifted in their favour. The bourgeois parties forming in West Germany at this time sought to ensure that the old private capitalist ownership relations were preserved, despite popular referenda demanding the democratisation of the economy through the nationalisation of industry and other measures.

The West German region of Hessen is an example of this desire for change. Here, the social democrats and communists held a majority in the state government and drafted a state constitution that, in Article 41, outlined plans to socialise key industries and place the banking sector under public administration. Though a public referendum in December 1946 showed that 72% of voters were in favour of Article 41, the US military administration nevertheless opposed it, and US General Lucius Clay prohibited its implementation.

The land reform laws being drafted in West Germany were indicative of the rural population's desire for change. Ultimately, however, the rural population was left disappointed, as the few measures enacted in the West applied to only 5% of the total arable land. In the DDR, meanwhile, 3.2 million hectares were expropriated and redistributed – fourteen times more than in West Germany.¹⁸

The Political and Economic Background of Land Reform

Neither the Soviet Military Administration nor the German communists pursued the goal of socialist construction in East Germany in the immediate aftermath of the war. Rather, from 1945 to 1952, their main objective was to foster an anti-fascist, democratic transformation of a united Germany; eliminate German imperialism and militarism; and ensure that post-war Germany would become a neutral demilitarised zone in the international rivalry between the capitalist and socialist states.* As such, land reform – i.e., the parcellation of land as private property – cannot be seen as a policy of the DDR's socialist construction, which was first initiated in 1952, seven years after the war but as an effort to address pressing practical issues in the post-war era. Among them was the need to rebuild the collapsed food supply in East Germany by promoting small-scale agriculture, which motivated farmers to produce more and offered them the opportunity for self-sufficiency. Edwin Hoernle summarised the main reasons for land reform under these specific conditions:

The great agrarian reform is above all a decisive means for the complete eradication of Prussian militarism, whose main sup-

* Such an agreement was reached in Austria, for example, where the parliament passed the Declaration of Neutrality under the supervision of the Allied Powers in 1955. Austria thereafter remained outside both the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Warsaw Treaty Organization (also known as the Warsaw Pact).

porter was the Junker caste. Economically, the handing over of the land to the self-employed peasant is also urgently needed. In light of the current ruin of agriculture and the enormous lack of technical equipment, only proverbial peasant diligence, the fanaticism with which the smallholder farmer clings to his land, can bring about a rapid increase in agricultural production.¹⁹

Nonetheless, land reform was a decisive step that later enabled the eventual transition to socialism. The democratisation of the countryside and the encouragement of cooperation among the peasantry laid the socioeconomic foundations for the eventual creation of socialist relations in agriculture. This policy was first and foremost the fulfilment of the peasants' demand for the redistribution of land and an end to feudal oppression. Walter Ulbricht, the leader of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED), which emerged from a merger between the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) and Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) in April 1946, summed up this connection at a party conference in 1947:

To be frank, some people asked us at the beginning of the land reform: What kind of socialists are you? You're not even in favour of the 'collectivisation of farmland'. We responded to them: That might suit you, gentlemen, keeping the large estates together so that they could later be easily returned to their former owners! No, our course is different: we are acting to ensure that the large estates are completely divided up, so that the large landowners in Germany can never again reclaim this land.²⁰

In the short term, the structures created by land reform were able to significantly improve the food supply, both for the individual farmers and the whole country. However, it was clear from the outset that the small-scale farming facilitated by land reform would not be able to meet the increasing demands of food production in the long term, as it faced challenges resulting from the size of the allotted agricultural land, the limited availability of equipment, and other factors.



Image 4. Members of a land reform commission in the DDR measure a parcel of land in September 1945.



Image 5. Young people help dismantle an old estate house to obtain building materials for new farmhouses.

The Implementation and Impact of Land Reform

In East German public village assemblies in September 1945, agricultural workers, landless and smallholder peasants, and refugees* elected members from their ranks to land reform commissions that were tasked with coordinating the implementation of the reform. The commissions determined which land was to be expropriated; documented and secured an inventory of associated buildings and stocks; drew up lists of smallholder and landless peasants, agricultural workers, and refugees; and assessed land allocation applications submitted by individual peasants. Redistribution plans were discussed and ratified in public meetings in which all applicants for land allocation participated. In order to avoid favouritism, decisions regarding the allocation of plots, stock, and inventory were made by drawing lots. The land reform commissions were also responsible for creating the first peasants' mutual aid committees, established in the third quarter of 1945. These committees ensured that agricultural machinery was used efficiently and that mutual aid was organised among new farmers, from providing each other with advice on managing pests to lending helping hands during the harvest. Solidarity was to replace competition or obedience in the countryside.

More than 52,000 people** participated in the 9,500 land reform commissions, 38% of whom were agricultural workers, 35% of whom were smallholder and tenant farmers, and 12% of whom were resettled refugees. The remaining 15% were industrial workers and village craftsmen. The responsibility for implementing land reform was thus placed in the hands of the social forces that had the most vested interest in the reorganisation of land ownership. The executive boards of the commissions, consisting of five to seven members, were usually chaired by the district's mayor. By the end of 1945, most of the land marked for individual reallocation had been redistributed, and the landed nobility was generally expelled from the estates and villages over which they had reigned.

Since the implementation of the land reform was overseen by the local population, the commissions came to act as schools of democracy. For instance, the handover of the title deeds for allocated land became a day of celebration in the villages. Local party member Hermann Wesemann's account of a public meeting in Torisdorf, Schönberg county, paints a vivid picture of how land reform was implemented at the village level:

* An additional issue confronting the authorities in East Germany was the massive influx of refugees and the need to house them: 4.4 million refugees of German origin came to the Soviet Occupation Zone, accounting for over 24% of the population. They had been forcibly ousted from Eastern Europe by the retreating Wehrmacht or local populations and governments as the regions were liberated from fascist occupation. Industry and residential areas in the cities had largely been destroyed in the war, so barns and farmhouses were often converted into living spaces to house refugees.

** In terms of party membership, the land reform commissions were made up as follows: 12,475 communists, 9,164 social democrats, 974 members of the bourgeois-democratic parties, and 29,679 non-party members. See, Joachim Piskol, Christel Nehrig, and Paul Trixa, *Antifaschistisch-demokratische Umwälzung auf dem Lande (1945–1949)* [Anti-Fascist-Democratic Upheaval in the Countryside (1945–1949)] (Berlin: VEB Deutscher Landwirtschaftsverlag, 1984), 50.

Torisdorf was an estate of around 400 hectares. It belonged to Junker Axel Bunger, a staunch militarist who let 'his people' address him as 'Lord Captain'. There were some class-conscious workers in the village who helped us prepare a [monthly] village meeting. ... Everyone was there, including the resettled refugees. Some agricultural workers nervously tried to give the impression that they had just come across the meeting by chance. They held buckets of water or milk cans in their hands and stood at the back. This was no doubt because of [their fear of] 'Lord Captain', who kept tabs on everything in the village. ... Opinions went back and forth for a while until, finally, everyone agreed to divide up the estate. A land commission was formed and was to be headed by an agricultural worker. But now the landowner had to be officially informed of the meeting's decision. When we went to see him, he was already shouting and swearing at us. I told him briefly about the decision and asked him to hand over the keys and all estate documents to the land commission immediately, to stay in his room until further notice and to refrain from any interference. He initially tried to intimidate us, declaring that the meeting did not have the authority and that he would not recognise oral decrees at all. In response to the question of authority, I asked him whether he thought this was a question of political power. For in this regard, he was too late: it had already been decided in favour of the working people. He and his peers had been outplayed. We kept him under constant watch until the estate was divided up, which happened soon afterwards, and prevented him from sending communications.²¹

Torisdorf was among the 3.3 million hectares of land – around one-third of the agricultural and forestry land – and 14,000 buildings that were expropriated without compensation in the Soviet Occupation Zone as part of the land reform. Of the 3.3 million hectares of expropriated land, 76% consisted of 7,160 private estates (farms with more than 100 hectares of arable land); 4% of 4,537 farms owned by active Nazis and war criminals with less than 100 hectares of land; and the remaining 20% of state property and Nazi party property.²²

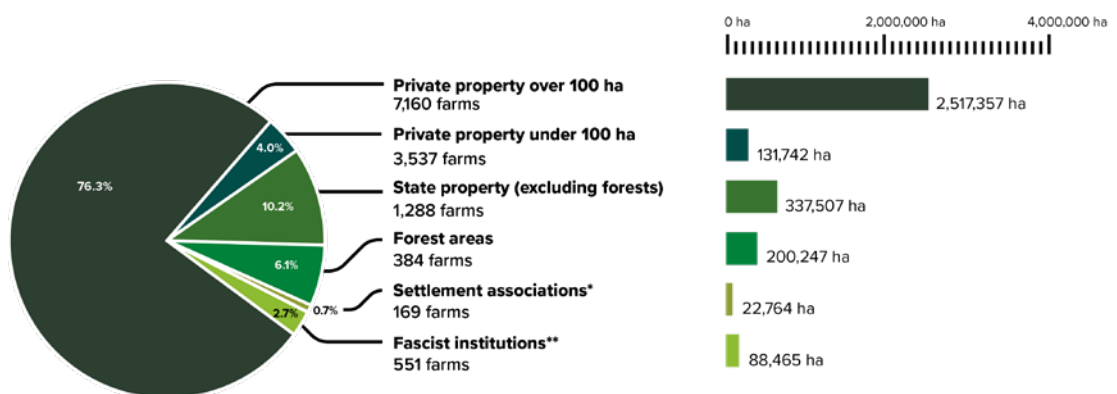
Two-thirds of this land (2.2 million hectares) was transferred to a central land fund, which was then distributed to individual applicants as identified and listed by the land reform commissions. The expropriated land was distributed to small farmers, agricultural workers, peasants, and refugees as privately owned plots and could be passed down within a family on the condition that the recipient family members use the land. It could not be sold, leased, or mortgaged. Forty-three percent of the expropriated land was distributed to agricultural workers and landless peasants, while 35% went to refugees.²³ As a result of the land reform, the share of agricultural land cultivated by smallholder farmers doubled.

Various measures were implemented to improve the quality of life of the new farmers and support nascent businesses. These measures included flexible delivery quotas, loans, and the provision of seed and livestock. Efforts were made to promote mutual cooperation and assistance during harvest times, as well as a special construction programme initiated

by the SMA which led to the building of approximately 95,000 houses, 104,300 stables, and 38,470 barns by 1953.²⁴ Due to the shortage of labour, agricultural machinery, and draft animals, it was important and necessary to ensure cooperation between the peasants and the local authorities, organisations, and businesses. For example, the urban population was mobilised to help new farmers harvest their yields.

The remaining expropriated land (1.1 million hectares) became state property, resulting in the creation of 500 state-owned estates.²⁵ Initially, these estates served as supply farms for the Red Army as part of the post-war reparations to the Soviet Union. Later, they were converted into Publicly Owned Estates (Volkseigene Güter, VEG), which became important mechanisms to support other agricultural enterprises, both publicly and privately owned, such as farms for seed and animal breeding, training and education, and experimental and research purposes. They also supported economically struggling farmers in an advisory capacity and played a pioneering role in the introduction of new farming methods.

Sources of Land Expropriated Under Land Reform (1946)

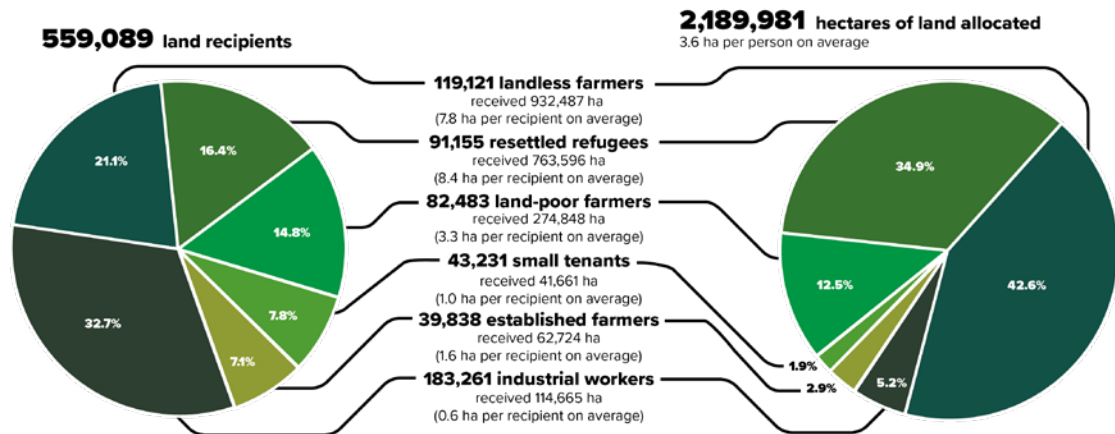


Data from Klaus Schmidt, *Landwirtschaft in der DDR* [Agriculture in the DDR] (Clenze: AgriMedia, 2009), 16.

* Beginning in the early twentieth century, non-profit companies bought large estates and divided them into plots for lease to sharecroppers.

** Individuals and organisations associated with the Nazi Party.

Land Reform Recipients and Allocations (1951)



Data from Klaus Schmidt, *Landwirtschaft in der DDR* [Agriculture in the DDR] (Clenze: AgriMedia, 2009), 16.

Changes in the Socioeconomic Structure of Land Ownership in East Germany between 1939 and 1951

Farm size (ha of farmland)	Share of total farms (%)		Share of total agricultural land (%)	
	1939	1951	1939	1951
0.5–1	20.7	21.8	1.3	2.0
1–5	35.3	25.1	7.8	8.8
5–10	16.4	31.7	10.6	31.4
10–20	16.6	15.2	21.1	27.4
20–50	8.5	5.5	22.5	21.4
50–100	1.4	0.6	8.4	4.6
Over 100	1.1	0.1	28.3	4.4

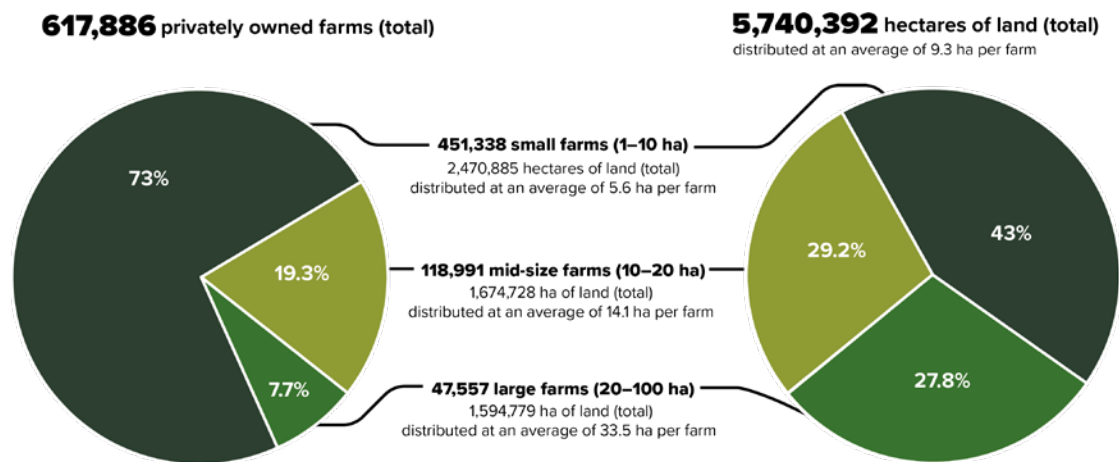
This means, for example, that in 1939 only 1.1% of all farms had more than 100 hectares of land. However, these few farms accounted for 28.3% of the total agricultural land. Land reform not only greatly increased the number of small and medium-sized farmers but also enormously increased their share of the total utilised agricultural land.

Data from a Collective of authors, *Früchte des Bündnisses – Werden und Wachsen der sozialistischen Landwirtschaft der DDR* [Fruits of the Alliance – The Development and Growth of Socialist Agriculture in the DDR] (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1985), 33.

In early 1946, East Germans went to the polls to elect local commissions for the Peasants' Mutual Aid Association (Vereinigung der gegenseitigen Bauernhilfe, VdgB), thereby turning the organically grown peasant mutual aid committees into official administrative bodies. The Peasants' Mutual Aid Association was tasked with establishing machine-lending stations (Maschinen-Ausleih-Stationen, MASs), where peasants could rent agricultural machinery and equipment, and with setting up businesses that processed agricultural products and built repair workshops and cattle rearing centres.

By 1950, there were 32,621 state-owned farms and agricultural enterprises and 617,886 privately owned agricultural farms of at least one hectare, the latter of which cultivated around 88% of all agricultural land in the DDR (5.7 million hectares).²⁶ In 1948, 40,000 farms were run independently by women farmers, a result both of land reform and of the significant number of soldiers who died during the war.²⁷ With an average size of 9.3 hectares, privately owned farms were divided as follows:

Socioeconomic Structure of Privately Owned Farms, 1950



Data from Klaus Schmidt, *Landwirtschaft in der DDR* [Agriculture in the DDR] (Clenze: AgriMedia, 2009), 131.

At the time, roughly two of the eight million people employed in the DDR worked in agriculture. A quarter were agricultural workers (workers with contracts); another quarter were farmers (self-employed owner or tenant of a farm), and half consisted virtually entirely of family workers (the family of the owner or tenant working without contract, social security, or income tax), which were almost exclusively women.²⁸ Of the approximately 500,000 farmers, 210,000 were new farmers.*

In sum, the implementation of land reform in East Germany marked a historic turning point in the democratisation of agrarian relations and radically improved the living conditions of the rural population. With the economic and political power of the landed nobility finally broken, peasants and agricultural workers increasingly developed into self-confident and socially influential classes. They began to actively shape society through new democratic structures such as the Land Reform Commission, the Peasants' Mutual Aid Association, and the

* In addition to the aforementioned resettlers, 'new farmers' refers to landless farmers, and agricultural workers, in some cases only non-agricultural workers and employees are referred to as new farmers. Of these, 183,261 were allocated 5% of the land reform area and thus generally farmed areas of less than two hectares of land. See Klaus Schmidt, *Landwirtschaft in der DDR* [Agriculture in the DDR], (AgriMedia, 2009), 16.

Democratic Farmers' Party of Germany.* Cooperation and participation in decision-making processes became central features of peasants' lives, bringing the question of power to the fore in the countryside. This was a new beginning, uncharted territory for a peasantry that had known only centuries of feudal oppression and then twelve years of fascist warmongering.



Image 6. A celebration of the 100th tractor built in the Brandenburg tractor factory in October 1949. The sign (right) reads: 'Fighting for peace is fighting for Germany's future'; the mural (left) reads: 'Peace nourishes – war destroys'.

* The Democratic Farmers' Party of Germany was founded in 1948 to strengthen the political involvement and representation of farmers in the DDR. The party held a permanent faction in the Volkskammer (People's Chamber), allowing it to express rural interests in parliament. In the rural communities, it played an active role developing infrastructure, supporting cultural life, and accompanying the agricultural cooperatives.

4. Building Cooperatives: 'From Me to We'

In Germany, cooperatives and cooperative farmers' associations existed prior to the DDR in the form of agricultural enterprises that offered bank loans and organised purchases and sales of agricultural products (seed, fertiliser, etc.). However, since Junkers and large-scale farmers held leading positions in the associations, they were able to use them to strengthen their dominance over small and medium-sized farms. By 1950, because of the land reform programme, these organisational units had been restructured and integrated into the Peasants' Mutual Aid Association as the Farmers' Trade Cooperative (Bäuerliche Handelsgenossenschaft), replacing a logic of subjugation with one of solidarity.

On the production side, the first Agricultural Production Cooperative (LPG) was founded in 1952. From the outset, LPGs were conceived not merely as institutions for the collective production of agricultural goods, but as broader social organisations tasked with economic, social, and cultural functions. The socialist character of cooperative production established itself through the LPG's stated purpose, operations, and, above all, its integration within the DDR's political and economic structures. Yet establishing this socialist character and continuing the fundamental transformation in the countryside proved to be a complex process.

For the DDR's agricultural policies to meet the material needs of the population, especially in a context facing post-war ruin and an economy short of labour power, the question of scale and efficiency were key. Bruno Kiesler, head of the SED Central Committee's Agriculture Department, explained how 'democratic land reform was a strategically correct decision, though its initiators were aware that large-scale production was ultimately superior to a fragmented, small-scale economy in agriculture'. In order to 'take the rural masses along this path', he continued, rather than imposing the idea of large-scale production on them from above, the peasants 'first had to find their own footing and gain trust in the political leadership. Through their daily working of the land, they gradually came to recognise that communal, cooperative work was more effective'.²⁹

The economic pressure to overcome small-scale agricultural production increased at the beginning of the 1950s with the heightened demand for agricultural products, both as raw materials for industry and as foodstuffs for the population as post-war scarcity gave way to peacetime demands. At the same time, there were signs of stagnation in agricultural production and labour productivity, and the difficult economic situation led to farm closures, especially among new farmers.³⁰ Furthermore, parcelled agricultural production on small private farms hindered the rational distribution of labour and made it difficult to efficiently use agricultural machinery, which was already scarce. Manual labour remained predominant. In 1950, the 514 machine-tractor sta-

tions (Maschinen-Traktoren-Station, MTSs) in the DDR had just 10,834 tractors and 675 trucks for the entire country.³¹ By 1952, before the cooperative movement began, some 30,000 new farmers had abandoned their farms.³² While the MAS – the precursor of the MTS – serviced individual farmers and offered small equipment, the MTS sought both to extend beyond individual equipment rentals, providing large agricultural machinery and organising its deployment in the most efficient way across more and larger LPGs.



Image 7. Courtyard of an MTS in Obhausen, Saxony-Anhalt, DDR (1950).

The socialist historian Kurt Gossweiler described the increasing necessity to make a strategic decision about the political system under which to develop the agricultural sector:

Faced with the urgent need to increase the agricultural yield, the DDR's leadership had to decide how to open the way to large-scale agriculture: either along capitalist or socialist lines. For this reason, the discussion about the construction of socialism in the DDR was primarily a discussion about whether the formation of agricultural production cooperatives would be approved.³³

A policy oriented toward cooperative agricultural production would have a profound impact on labour and property relations in rural life. It was a far-reaching decision that could not be resolved until the national question in Germany had been settled. In 1949, when the DDR was founded as an anti-fascist, democratic state in reaction to the founding of the Federal Republic of Germany (Bundesrepublik Deutschland, BRD), the Soviet Union, as well as the communists in West and East Germany, continued to pursue the strategic goal of a unified, non-aligned German

republic in which the Four Ds of the 1945 Potsdam Agreement would be implemented.*

Ultimately, the SED and the political leadership of the Soviet Union recognised the necessity to shift strategies. At its 1952 party congress, the SED decided to begin the construction of socialism through the formation of LPGs. Walter Ulbricht, general secretary of the SED, stressed the need for farmers to join cooperatives on a voluntary basis, emphasising 'the principle of absolute voluntariness in the organisation of such cooperatives and to point out the inadmissibility of applying any kind of coercion towards the peasants in this regard'. Furthermore, Ulbricht continued, 'Comrade Lenin himself had stressed that communal agriculture cannot be introduced by decrees and laws'.³⁴



Image 8. An SED agitation poster from the 1950s that reads: 'The future belongs to socialism. Individual farmers, join the LPG'.

* In the 1945 Potsdam Agreement, the heads of state of the victorious Soviet Union, United States, and Great Britain met to discuss how to proceed with the defeated Germany and debated the future of the country. The 1945 Potsdam Agreement laid out the 'Four Ds': democratisation (restructure public life), decentralisation (crush the concentration of economic power among monopolistic businesses), demilitarisation (completely disarm and destroy the German arms industry), and denazification (remove all Nazis from relevant positions and punish war criminals).

Building Socialism One LPG at a Time

Though the need to develop cooperatives and the structures for large-scale agricultural production was clear, in many respects the subjective and objective conditions to carry out such a project had not yet developed. How would the DDR bring about a shift in peasants' way of thinking, working, and living?

In some cases, it was peasants and agricultural workers who pushed for a form of collective production. Such peasants had in fact urged the SED to support the founding of cooperatives even before the party's decision to do so in July 1952, and this approach is what led to the creation of the first LPG in Thuringia in the same year. They were in favour of LPGs because they either saw them as a necessary response to the difficult economic situation on their own land or because they knew of cooperative agriculture in the Soviet Union and were convinced of the need for socialism.



Image 9. In January 1953, nine farmers founded an agricultural production cooperative in the municipality of Blochwitz (Grossenhain district). A farmer named Godzina signs a document to register herself as a member of the cooperative.

Yet, for the vast majority of peasants – especially among long-established medium and large-scale farmers – the thought of giving up individual farming was still inconceivable in 1952. Many were dismissive, while others took a wait-and-see approach. An unprecedented reorientation was necessary to promote a more collective way of thinking and work-

ing, which came to be known by the slogan *Vom Ich, zum Wir* ('From Me to We'). SED agriculture secretary Gerhard Grüneberg summarised some of the major difficulties in this process:

Cooperative work makes it necessary to become a member of a collective. Previously, the peasant alone decided how to organise his work. Now he* receives instructions or, if he becomes head of a brigade, for example, he must organise the work for many people... [and] learn to overcome certain prejudices and respect other cooperative members as his equals.³⁵

In the initial phase, new and smallholder farmers who managed economically weak farms of all sizes were the main driving force behind the cooperative movement.³⁶ Large-scale farmers were excluded from LPG membership until 1955 in order to ensure that those peasants with closer links to the working class played the decisive role in the cooperatives from the outset.³⁷ Generally, smallholder farmers, agricultural workers, and new farmers were easily recruited to join LPGs because they faced the greatest economic difficulties and were less attached to their land.



Image 10. On 19 May 1954, the Freie Erde (Free Soil) LPG in Magdeburg-Salbke builds a large farmyard. The cooperative's farmers laid the foundation stone together with workers from neighbouring industrial enterprises. The sign reads: 'How we work today is how we will live tomorrow!'

* The German original employs generic masculine forms, consistent with standard usage in the DDR. This translation retains these terms solely to preserve the source text.



Image 11. The LPG construction brigade builds a feed house on 19 October 1955. Between April and October of that year, the construction brigade completed three new stables. By 1960, the brigade had built farrowing pens, and combines for pigs, cattle, and poultry. All these major construction projects were completed with the help of volunteer construction workers.

The nascent LPGs faced unfavourable conditions of production in the early years, such as degraded soil, no experience in organising large-scale collective production, and a shortage of labour and lack of available barns, stables, and other farm buildings. The process was made even more difficult by the fact that farmers often joined the cooperatives one by one. Integrating new members and new areas of production were a constant challenge. Crop rotations and the organisation of production had to be adjusted frequently. On average, it took five to ten years to establish solid structures and continuous operating procedures in LPGs.³⁸

Despite these and other challenges, by 1952 the first cooperatives were already farming an average of 114 hectares of agricultural land.³⁹ This meant that the material prerequisites for large-scale production – such as the new agricultural machinery and technology and funds needed to construct farm buildings – had to be secured as quickly as possible. Even though the manufacturing of agricultural machinery accelerated in 1952, there was still a lack of sufficient technical equipment and training for cooperative farmers. All of this put further strains on the national economy.

In order to facilitate a gradual and accessible transition to cooperatives, the state introduced active development incentives and subsi-

dised newly established LPGs through measures such as the reduction of tax arrears and outstanding debts, the provision of free technical expertise, the priority allocation of quality seeds and mineral fertilisers, and the provision of loans on favourable terms.⁴⁰ For the same reason, three different types of LPGs were created, which introduced a gradual approach away from the private property model of the previous system to the collective approach of LPGs. From type I to III, each stage introduced a different extent of socialising the means of production, requiring participation in communal work, and regulating income distribution:

- In Type I LPGs, arable land, machinery, equipment, and draught animals became collective property while productive and breeding livestock remained the property of the farmers.
- In Type II LPGs, tractors, draught animals, machinery, and equipment were also transferred to the LPG.
- Type III LPGs operated as fully collective and independent enterprises. Here, except for private household farming, the farmers' entire homestead (arable land, grassland, woodland, livestock, tractors, machinery, equipment, farm buildings) was transferred to the cooperative.

In all three types, the land that peasants brought into the LPG remained their own property rather than state property and was taken into account when wages were distributed.* The higher the tier, the less the land contributed by the farmers was taken into account for remuneration.

In 1949, the machine-lending stations, which had been organised by the Peasants' Mutual Aid Association to share existing machines between farmers, were transformed into state-owned machine-tractor stations (MTSs). This change reflected the growing supply of tractors and agricultural machinery. The MTSs played a leading role in forming and stabilising cooperatives: while larger technical equipment, trucks, and machine systems could not be purchased privately by the peasants due to cost, scarcity, and policy restrictions, in the MTSs they could be borrowed according to a tariff system that favoured small over large-scale farmers and cooperatives over individual farms. Furthermore, since the technical base of the MTSs and their advisory service on crop production and soil conditions were continually expanded by the state, they effectively determined the direction of development towards large-scale industrial-style agricultural production.

In addition to meeting the economic needs of the peasantry, the MTSs played a central role in the political and cultural development in the villages. Cultural annex buildings were attached to the MTSs, where further training for farmers, agrochemical and zootechnical consultations, film screenings, theatre trips, music and dance groups, libraries and sports

* This differed from the Soviet Union's *kolkhozy*, a form of agricultural cooperative in the Soviet Union that existed along with state farms (*sovkhoz*). *Kolkhozy* were established in 1929 during the state programme of expropriating private holdings. Unlike the cooperative model in the DDR, farmland in the Soviet Union was state-owned and was leased to the *kolkhozy* for an indefinite period. Peasants worked the land collectively and received compensation based on their labour contributions. While principally self-managed, *kolkhozy* operated within a broader framework of state planning and oversight.

clubs, and much more were organised by the MTs. These cultural houses became an essential hub for agricultural development, social and cultural interaction, and democratisation of society. Furthermore, MTs served as support hubs and cooperative recruitment bases for the working class in rural areas, connecting mechanics, tractor drivers, and other workers with peasants who were involved in cooperatives.



Image 12. Villagers browsing through the library in the community of Krien, in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, DDR.

Integrating Cooperatives into the Planned Economy

Though the shift toward cooperative agriculture was initiated with the founding of the first LPG in 1952, the first LPG law was only passed in 1959. Incorporating the experiences of the past seven years and the aspirations of those yet to come, this law and later versions included a comprehensive definition of the social role and task of cooperatives. The 1982 version of the law stated the following:

§1 Principles

(1) Agricultural production cooperatives (hereinafter referred to as LPGs) are voluntary associations of farmers, gardeners, and other citizens that promote joint socialist production to meet the material, cultural, and food supply needs of the population, as well as provide industries with raw materials. LPGs ensure a significant increase in output and high efficiency in agricultural production by constantly improving the ratio of input to output.

(2) In LPGs, cooperative farmers organise their joint work and social relations according to the principles of cooperative democracy and socialist business management, such as equality, com-

radely cooperation, and mutual aid. Farmers jointly decide over cooperative property and share in the economic gains of their LPG according to cooperative principles of distribution.⁴¹

Six years into the transition to socialist agriculture, the SED's Fifth Party Congress in 1958 set the goal of achieving self-sufficiency in agricultural production as well as adequate access to raw materials for the agricultural industry by 1962. Apart from products that could not be grown in the DDR due to climate and environmental conditions (e.g. tropical fruits, coffee, cocoa, etc.), food sovereignty was thereafter largely achieved.*

In order to plan and develop the national economy, cooperative agricultural production had to be integrated into the DDR's centrally planned economic system. The primary instrument for planning agricultural production was the Plan of State Production Volume of Agricultural Products, which was worked out through a complex process of assessments and discussions. First, the demand for agricultural goods and products was determined at a central level by the State Planning Commission, the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, and the Central State Office for the Registration and Purchase of Agricultural Products. This included priorities for the development of production as well as cultural and social progress. The objectives laid out in this draft plan were then discussed at the district and municipal levels as well as in the individual LPGs and the other socialist agricultural enterprises before being presented again at the central level and then adopted by the People's Chamber of the DDR. Only then, based on the annual plan, did individual LPGs draw up their final operating plans, working closely with the municipal councils. The plan's implementation was then monitored by the municipality's council or mayor.

Each task in the LPGs was assigned a value on a scale of 0.8 to 1.6 work units, a conversion key that served to classify these according to their importance, difficulty, and the qualifications required to complete them. Complicated work was remunerated with more units than simpler work, with members completing a range of tasks in a given period, each assigned a specific work-unit value. A work unit corresponded to a monetary value which was calculated from the total sum of the generated funds available for distribution to the members and the number of work units performed in the LPGs. A minimum value of seven marks (the official currency of the DDR) per work unit was guaranteed by the state. Since the exact value of earned work units could only be determined at the end of the year, a system was used in which approximately 70% of the planned value of work units was paid in advance.⁴² Solveig Leo, a long-standing chairwoman of an LPG, recalled the process of assigning value to work units and the debates that arose:

In the evening, they [the LPG farmers] usually assessed the day's performance and recorded the work units on a blackboard in the LPG: 1.1 or 1.2 work units or so per day for each

* The DDR's statistical yearbooks consistently record a certain level of agricultural imports, primarily tropical fruits. However, as former Minister of Agriculture Hans Watzek noted in our interview, some wheat was also imported – even from capitalist countries. This and other related interviews are available at ifDDR.org.

name. This meant that every cooperative farmer was able to see how many work units his colleague had been awarded. And, of course, there were debates. For instance, if someone disagreed and thought they had worked much more diligently than what the calculation showed, they asked: 'Why do I have only 1.1 and he has 1.3?'. Then the chief brigadier had to explain why.⁴³



Image 13. LPG bookkeeping was a difficult and often unpopular but necessary task. An agronomist from the Peasants' Mutual Aid Association (left) trains a farmer (right) who took on this work for an LPG in Neubredersdorf, DDR, while some of the other members check the calculations (October 1954).

When an LPG laid out its production plan, it allocated its revenue to various funds in coordination with the municipal council. These funds were divided into a consumption reserve and an investment reserve with various distinctions, such as the essential fund (which went towards farm buildings, machinery, equipment with a long service life, membership initiation fees from cooperative members, etc.); working capital; investment; remuneration; cultural; and social expenditure.

As was the case in other sectors in the DDR, in order to promote production, competitions were organised within and among LPGs alongside annual plans and everyday brigade work. The aim was to mobilise additional resources in labour time, draw public attention to the importance of agriculture, and make villagers aware of the collective results of all the work in the agricultural sector, including the work of the LPGs. Author Thomas Kupfermann describes how much public attention these competitions attracted:

The mechanised harvesting of crops on a large scale... was known as the 'battle of the harvest'. The hard-working men – and women – who drove their combine harvesters across the large LPG fields and took their machines to the next job on the roads... were the 'harvest captains'. Every year, the harvest battle raged, and the media accompanied it with headlines and success stories... The cooperatives participated in district competitions, which were also reported on, and at the end of the harvest battle there were awards for the winners and their pictures were featured in the 'Streets of the Best' [blackboards where the best workers were displayed].⁴⁴

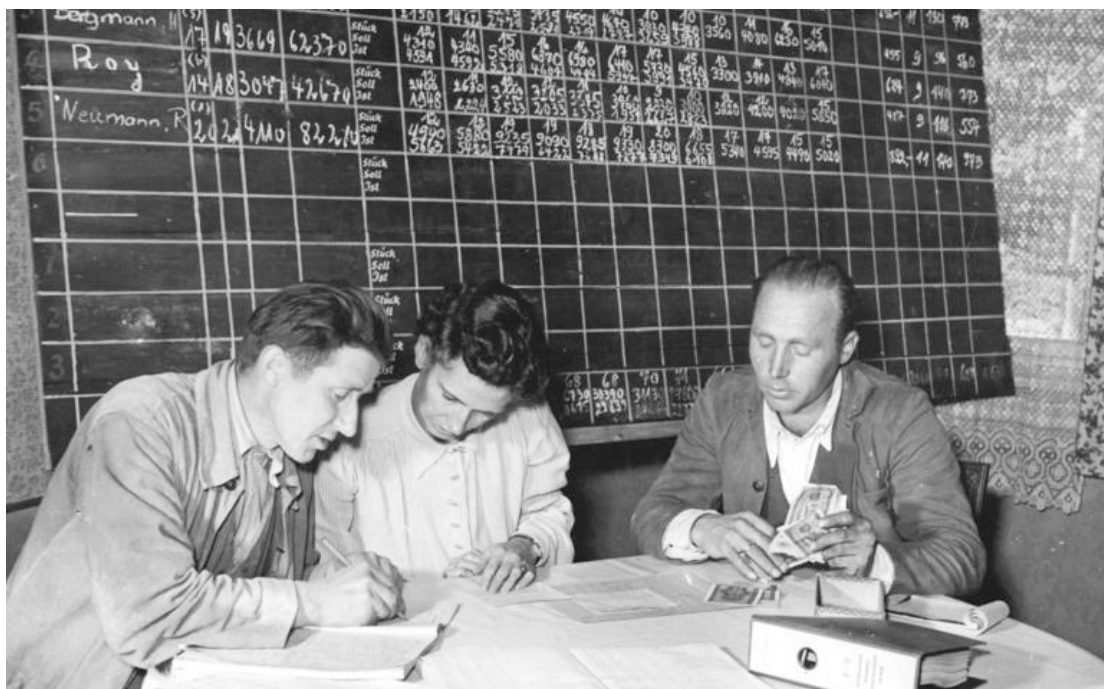


Image 14. Colleagues from the Institute for Agroeconomics at the German Academy of Agricultural Sciences in Berlin support the senior accountant of the Schönemark LPG, Anne-Margret Mielke, as she prepares the monthly cash audit.



Image 15. Thirty-two female farmers from the Vorwärts LPG in Groß Beuchow, DDR, harvested 100 tonnes of potatoes, which were immediately taken to nearby shops (September 1961).



Image 16. In 1961, the Friendship Milking Brigade of an LPG in Neßdorf produced more than 80,000 kilograms of milk, exceeding the target production plan for that year.



Image 17. Members of the Priborn LPG discuss high crop yields and the efficient use of technology at their annual general assembly (January 1973).

Class Struggle and Policy Disputes

The progress of the cooperative movement in the DDR was shaped both by internal conditions and by the political conditions across Europe in the 1950s. In the DDR and Eastern Europe, the development of socialism was still in its infancy. At the same time, the Cold War waged by the US and its Western allies against the socialist camp intensified. There were many attempts to exploit uncertainties and contradictions in socialist countries and their political leadership, especially following the death of Joseph Stalin in March 1953. The violent political crises and anti-government protests in the DDR in 1953, Poland in 1956, and Hungary that same year can be understood in this context.

As late as March 1952, Heinrich von Brentano, then chairman of the CDU/CSU parliamentary group in West Germany's Bundestag, openly stated his intentions to regain control of East Germany: 'We will do anything and everything – and I say explicitly: anything and everything – to get the Soviet Occupation Zone back'.⁴⁵ In particular, the open border between West and East Berlin offered the West a wide range of opportunities for disruptive actions, including espionage, sabotage, and establishing terrorist organisations. For instance, the West Berlin

radio station, Rundfunk im amerikanischen Sektor (Broadcasting in the American Sector), used manipulative, negative reporting to increase farmers' doubts about the prospects of the socialist perspective.⁴⁶

The West exploited existing challenges and discontent in the DDR, which mainly stemmed from the population's struggle to overcome the consequences of the war, and weaponised them against its government. Seeing how tense the political situation was becoming at the beginning of June 1953, the DDR's leadership implemented comprehensive relief measures for the population. Nevertheless, protests broke out weeks later on 17 June 1953, which were incited into a counter-revolutionary coup attempt with the help of the West.

In the aftermath of the unrest, the SED leadership reflected critically and publicly on its policy mistakes, including in regard to the cooperative movement that had begun one year earlier. In a newspaper article, the SED Central Committee wrote:

The party, which had taken the right course towards building the foundations of socialism in the DDR, took the wrong path of accelerating the solution of this task without taking into account the real internal and external conditions. This... had detrimental consequences for the population's food supply and to a certain extent led to the disruption of proper relations between the party and the working masses. Administrative methods were employed where broad and diligent educational work amongst the masses should have taken place.

It was right for the party organisations to support the movement to form agricultural production cooperatives that emerged in the DDR following the initiative of working farmers. However, in some circles, party organisations tolerated the violation of the strict principle of voluntariness and tried to increase the number of cooperatives without devoting the necessary attention to the organisational and economic consolidation of the existing cooperatives, which is the main task of the party when advancing the development of cooperatives in the villages.⁴⁷

Eventually, the effort required to establish new LPGs made further expansion difficult, leading the state to shift toward consolidating existing LPGs, supporting their efforts to raise production capacity, and integrating additional farmers, while also providing greater support to private farms whose productivity was still essential to meeting overall agricultural targets.

During this period, there was a renewed debate about the future of agriculture in the DDR, which largely revolved around the extent to which the state should continue to promote cooperatives. In the mid-1950s, most cooperatives were still less productive than medium and privately owned large-scale farms and had to be supported by state subsidies. Some politicians and analysts used this as an opportunity to campaign against state support for 'unproductive' cooperatives and for strengthening privately owned farms. These proposals were sharply

rejected by the SED leadership under Walter Ulbricht, who declared in 1957 at a conference of the Central Committee:

It is being said that the orderly development of agriculture and the systematic promotion of socialist agriculture should be abandoned... Priority, they say, should be given to the development of [private] family farms... This proposal paves the path back to a capitalist economy, whereby the large farmers would become the main economic force in the village.⁴⁸

These disputes reveal that, throughout the entire period of the cooperative movement, there were deep conflicts and debates about how to balance the relationship between voluntariness and the active and determined promotion of cooperatives by the state. Administrative exaggerations by government agencies and political leaders that violated the principle of voluntariness were criticised and opposed. Yet so too were ideas of a self-sustaining process that assigned the state a passive role towards the farmers. There was also an active struggle against the forces that set out to sabotage the development of socialist agriculture.

Socialist Springtime: The Height of the Cooperative Movement

By 1958, six years after the first LPG was founded, there had been a gradual consolidation and stabilisation of productive capacity within the cooperative movement, though state support remained necessary in most cases. Yet, as long as private farms existed alongside the cooperative sector, the socialist transformation of the countryside remained incomplete. The coexistence of different socioeconomic structures in agriculture – cooperative production and individual farming – was bound to hold back the growth of productivity. At the same time, the mere existence of private enterprises in the countryside gave political opponents ammunition to argue against the project of socialist agriculture as a whole. Pressure increased to bring private enterprises into the cooperative movement and create a unified system.

From 1958 to 1960, commonly referred to as 'socialist springtime', almost all remaining private farmers were brought into LPGs through initiatives led by bloc parties,* mass organisations, the Democratic Farmers' Party of Germany, the Peasants' Mutual Aid Association, and MTSs. This consolidation was reinforced by economic measures that strengthened the sector's technical capacity, such a marked increase in the agricultural machinery available. As the LPGs' productivity visibly rose and state support became more effective, medium- and large-scale farmers who had long held reservations began to see the value of joining the cooperative sector.

* The five political parties in the DDR that had united to form an anti-fascist democratic bloc (SED, CDU, LDPD, DBD, NDPD) were called the bloc parties.

By the time the campaign was declared complete in the spring of 1960, its scale was visible in the statistics: the predominantly small, privately owned farms that had characterised agriculture in 1950 had given way to over 19,000 LPGs, each cultivating an average of around 280 hectares. Eighty-four percent of all agricultural land was now farmed cooperatively.⁴⁹



Image 18. Industrial workers help with the potato harvest. Cooperatives were assigned industrial enterprises at an early stage to provide support and workers helped with the harvest and repairs.

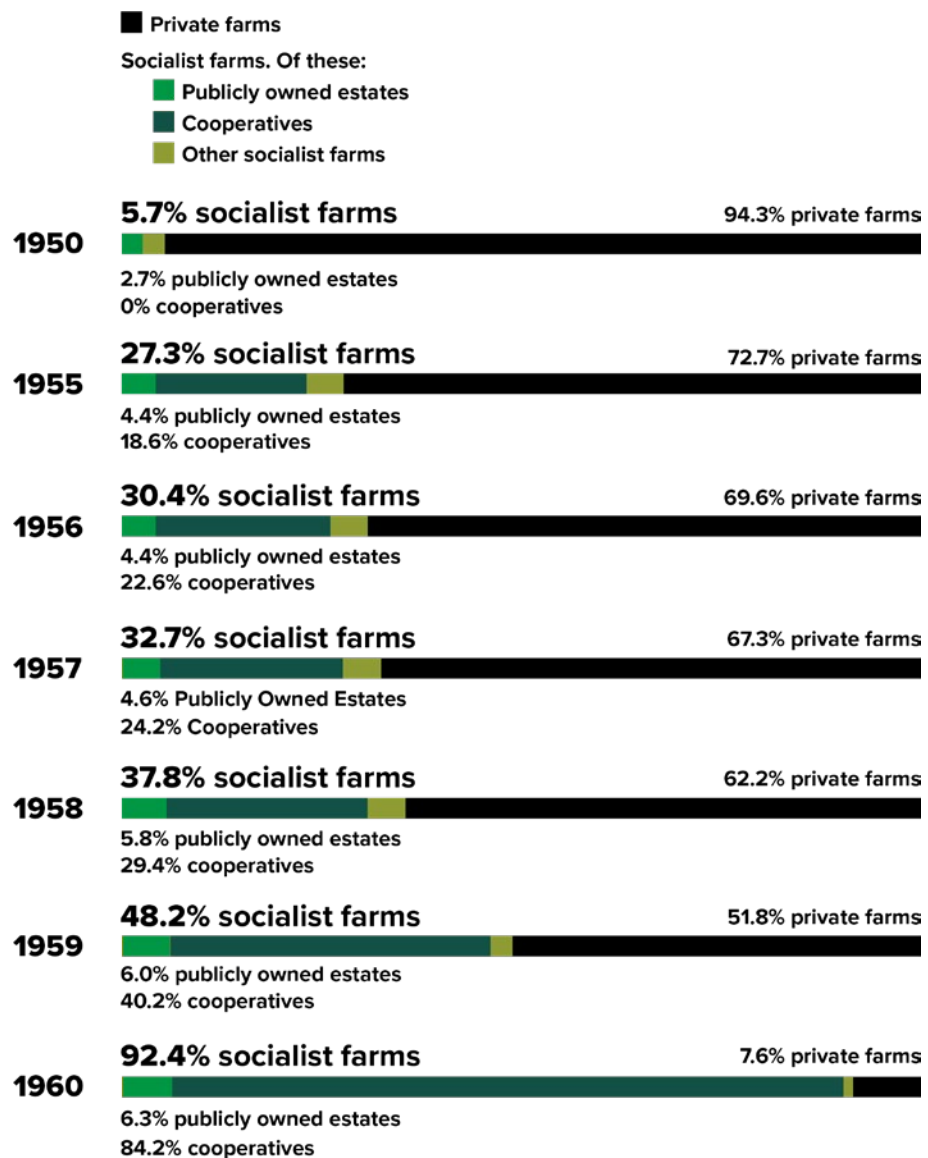
Women farmers played a key role in the expansion and consolidation of the cooperative movement, as they were often the key actors winning their families over. Women, who had traditionally worked in the time-consuming and physically taxing field of animal husbandry while also managing their households and childcare, certainly stood to gain the most from joining LPGs and the social benefits granted to their members.

Though the vast majority of farmers had agreed to join LPGs by the spring of 1960, in some cases, they only came to truly appreciate the benefits of cooperative production in the years that followed. One farmer, Elli I., reflected on her scepticism towards the cooperative in the early years:

As individual farmers, we had to work from dawn to dusk. In 1957, my daughter was born prematurely because I had to help my husband load thirty sacks of fertiliser. In the cooperative, we no longer had to worry about such things. We had joined the

cooperative quite late and, after years, I thought to myself, my goodness, how stupid had we been? You can't live any better than here. The work got easier. We had medical care, every woman could go to the doctor, we had housekeeping days, and vacations. When I think back, ... those were my best years.⁵⁰

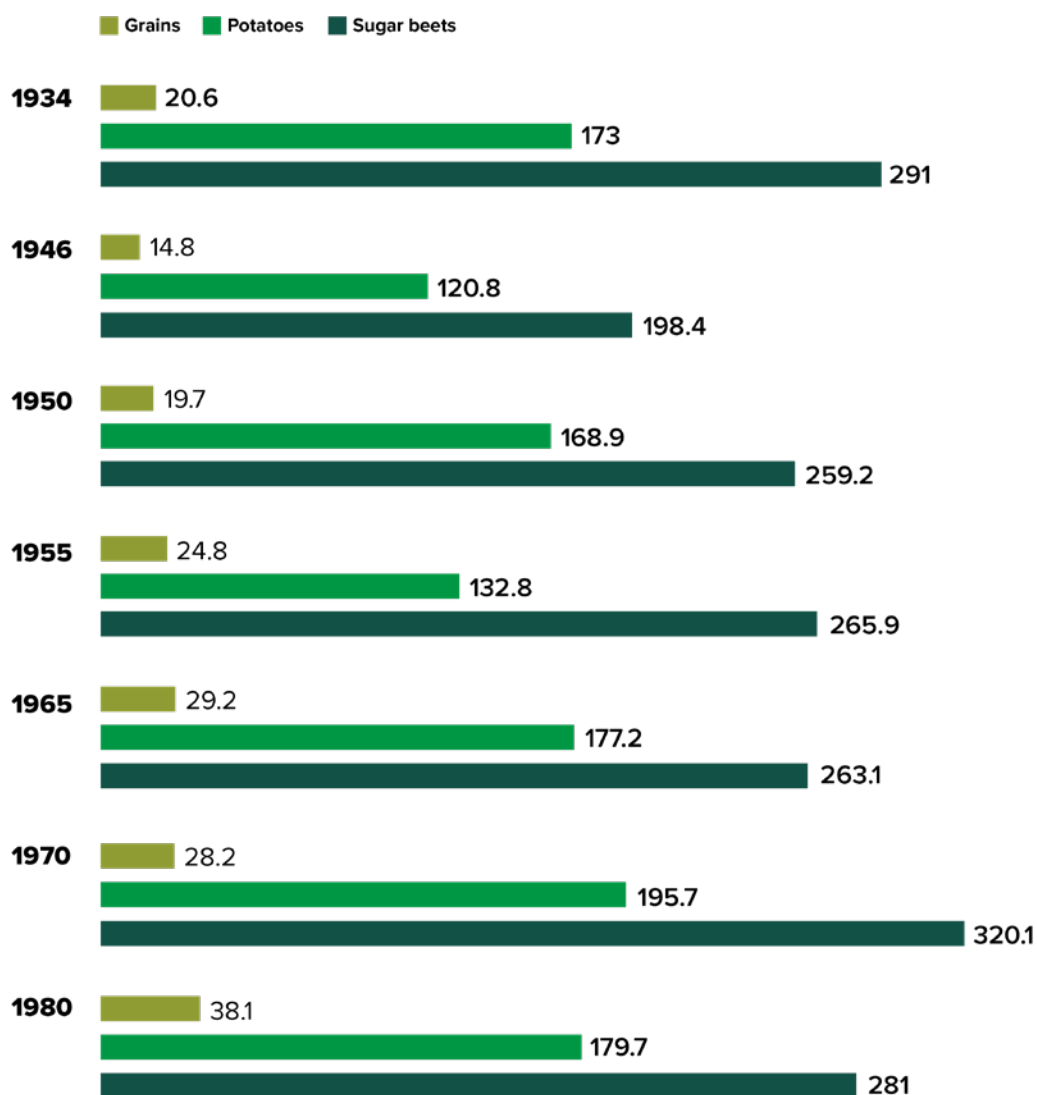
Share of Agricultural Land by Property Form



The socialist agricultural sector includes publicly owned estates and cooperatives. Other small state-owned agricultural enterprises are not shown separately, which accounts for the difference between the total share of socialist farms and the combined shares of publicly owned estates and cooperatives.

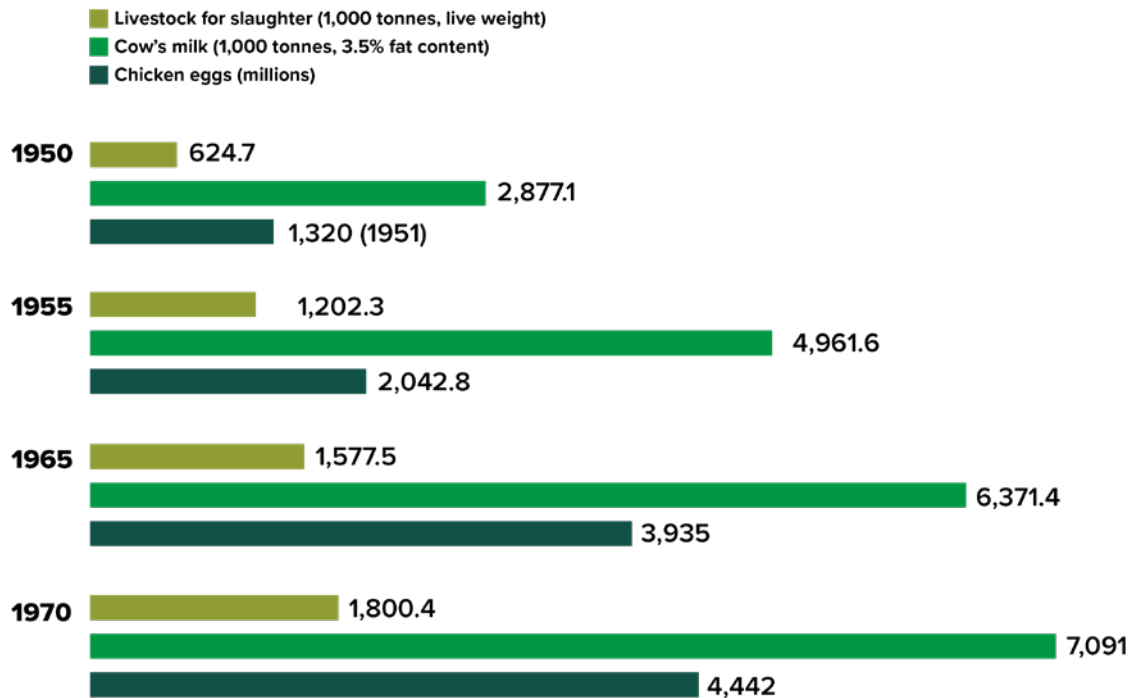
Data from State Central Administration for Statistics, *Statistisches Jahrbuch der DDR 1960/61* [Statistical Yearbook of the DDR 1960/61], VEB Deutscher Zentralverlag, 1962, 419.

Development of Crop Yields (decitonnes per hectare)



Data from Gerhard Seidel, *Die Landwirtschaft der DDR* [Agriculture in the DDR] (Berlin: VEB Deutscher Landwirtschaftsverlag, 1961), 37; Collective of authors under the direction of Volker Klemm, *Von den bürgerlichen Agrarreformen zur sozialistischen Landwirtschaft in der DDR* [From Bourgeois Agrarian Reforms to Socialist Agriculture in the DDR] (Berlin: VEB Deutscher Landwirtschaftsverlag, 1985), 220; State Central Administration for Statistics, *Statistisches Jahrbuch der DDR 1989* [Statistical Yearbook of the DDR 1989] (Berlin: VEB Deutscher Zentralverlag, 1990), 196.

Development of Animal Product Output



Data from State Central Administration for Statistics, *Statistisches Jahrbuch der DDR 1971* [Statistical Yearbook of the DDR 1971] (Berlin: VEB Deutscher Zentralverlag, 1971), 222; State Central Administration for Statistics, *Statistisches Jahrbuch der DDR 1955* [Statistical Yearbook of the DDR 1955] (Berlin: VEB Deutscher Zentralverlag, 1956), 224.

Cooperatives Drive Social and Cultural Progress

From their origin, the tasks of LPGs were not limited to agricultural production but to the improvement of rural life in general. Over time, they developed into hubs of social, communal, cultural-political, and economic development in rural communities. In coordination with the municipalities and urban enterprises, LPGs built apartments, cultural centres, kindergartens, and sports facilities. They improved roads and constructed new ones, installed water pipes and sewage systems, dug drainage ditches, and opened stores and restaurants. LPGs built on and expanded the cultural work of MTSs. Performances by theatre groups, dance nights for the youth, sporting events, and film screenings brought a new level of cultural life to the villages.

Hans Luft, an agronomist and former employee of the DDR's Ministry of Agriculture, reflects on the cultural transformation brought about by the new production relations of the LPG system:

The joint work in the cooperative and [resolving] the emerging problems such as the use of complex machinery to bring in the harvest as quickly as possible, difficulties with repairs and procuring spare parts for agricultural machinery, completion of construction and irrigation systems, [and] epidemic-free management of large livestock quickly broke down generations of

enmity in the villages. The farmers' children grew into the new forms of production with new knowledge, experience, and, above all, higher levels of qualification.⁵¹

Cooperatives vastly improved the rural population's living conditions, reducing the physical strain on farmers through communal work and the use of machinery.⁵² In addition to national programmes that guaranteed access to national social, health, and insurance systems and so on, the LPGs achieved a number of important social advances for their members, which were impossible for previous generations of farmers to even dream of and still unavailable to the few remaining private farms, such as:

- Equal pay for equal work
- Special remuneration for work on Sundays and public holidays
- Sick pay
- Child benefits, such as monthly cash payments and birth grants
- Paid vacation, with the option of spending it in a subsidised LPG-owned vacation site
- Fixed and predictable work hours, except during the harvest months
- The inclusion of all cooperative farmers in a uniform social insurance system that covered benefits such as healthcare, pensions, and accident insurance
- 'Exemption' from income tax contributions⁵³

In addition, child labour, which had been a common practice on family-run farms, disappeared with the advent of LPGs. Central schools replaced the single-class schools in the villages. Children and young people had access to the DDR's polytechnic education system, which enabled them to choose an independent career and provided a foundation for agricultural studies. Comprehensive education and training opportunities were created for cooperative farmers, from which female farmers benefited significantly as they were able to gain professional qualifications and take on managerial roles in the cooperative farms for the first time.

Margarete Müller, an agronomist and SED politician, described the progress that her village achieved:

I have lived in Kotelow since 1960. Back then, at the age of 29, I was elected LPG chairwoman. When we started, there were no paved roads and our boots got stuck deep in the mud. Bit by bit, we modernised the village and improved it. We were happy about every new house, every new stable, every new barn, about the dairy farm and the pigsties that we built together. We celebrated together and also got frustrated together when things didn't go the way we wanted them to. We were a community. Even in the summer, farmers could go on holiday, and youth who qualified

at universities and technical colleges sometimes moved back because they saw a future for themselves and their families in little Kotelow.⁵⁴

From 1960, the height of the cooperative movement, until the dissolution of the DDR in 1990, women accounted for roughly 40–45% of LPG members.⁵⁵ While only 8.5% of women working in agriculture had a degree or vocational training in 1963, compared to 18.1% of men, by 1984 this figure had reached 88.6% in the field of agriculture, compared to 90.2% of the general population.⁵⁶ In 1966, 26% of all board members of the LPGs were women.⁵⁷ Concrete structures such as the Women's Committees and Women's Development Plans were set up comprehensively in the LPGs and intended to strengthen the role of women, advocate for their interests, and increase their leadership positions. By 1978, the proportion of women in leadership positions had reached 35%, in part due to the increase in their professional and educational qualifications. However, the process of increasing the number of women in leadership stagnated in the late 1980s and women remained underrepresented among LPG chairs until the end of the DDR.⁵⁸



Image 19. Two teachers and an educational assistant look after forty-seven children in the kindergarten of the LPG Walter Ulbricht in Jahna, founded in 1952.



Image 20. The Peasants' Mutual Aid Association Women Farmers' Commission in the Stollberg district followed the resolutions of the Farmers' Congress to support women farmers and girls in their continuing education by offering special training courses. For fifteen weeks, forty-eight women and girls came to the district town for further training, including lectures, seminars, practical exercises, and field trips. The focus was on cattle breeding and husbandry because most of the participants worked in this field (February 1962).



Image 21. Anneliese Hartmann, a mechanisation expert from the V. I. Lenin LPG in Öttersdorf, operates a swather over green fodder areas in June 1978.

Anti-Imperialist Solidarity in Agriculture

As the DDR sought to bring the quality of life in rural and urban areas closer together, another pillar of socialist construction was cultivated among farmers: international solidarity.

On 1 September 1960, the Institute for Tropical Agriculture was founded at the Karl Marx University in Leipzig. Why was such an institute established in Germany, a country situated in a cool temperate climate zone? After losing its colonies at the end of the First World War, there was no longer any state interest in research and education relating to tropical agriculture. This changed with the DDR, albeit with an altogether different premise: young nation states that had emerged from anti-colonial struggles were to be actively supported on their path to economic liberation. Thousands of students from over sixty countries in the Global South were trained to develop agriculture in their home countries at the Leipzig Institute and a handful of other educational establishments, such as the School of Agricultural Engineering for Tropical Agriculture in Altenburg and the VEB Interagrarkooperation.

DDR citizens also attended courses and seminars designed specifically to prepare them for agricultural assignments abroad. Groups of DDR specialists, working in close collaboration with local experts and officials, supported the complex and protracted process of transforming feudal, colonially distorted, and backward agricultural structures into sovereign, state-controlled agricultural production.

Examples include pig specialists in Vietnam attempting to combine the fertility of the Vietnamese pot-bellied pig with the fattening capacity of German breeds, a tropical farmer in the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen who, together with local officials, carried out the first thorough statistical surveys of livestock production, or a group of thirty-eight DDR specialists who, on the basis of a friendship treaty between the DDR and Mozambique and in close cooperation with local forces, helped to establish a state farm – eight of whom were killed by counter-revolutionary forces in 1984.⁵⁹ Furthermore, the development of the first coffee-growing regions in Dak Lak, Vietnam – supported by 32 million roubles* – enabled the country to become the world's second-largest coffee producer.⁶⁰

The dispatch of tractors and agricultural machinery, as well as the setting up of repair workshops, was financed by donations from DDR citizens, including contributions from farmers. In thousands of cooperatives, farmers in the DDR set up solidarity groups and supported campaigns such as 'Farmers Help the Farmers of Vietnam', which sent spraying equipment to Vietnam to rehabilitate crops poisoned by the US chemical attacks.

* Here, roubles refers to the 'transfer rouble' (*Transferrubel*), a non-cash accounting unit used within the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (*Comecon*) to regulate trade and aid among socialist states. It differed from the Soviet national rouble and was used for clearing transactions between member states such as the DDR and Vietnam.



Image 22. Members of the Oskar Schneller LPG in Mansfeld express their solidarity and friendship with the Vietnamese people in the presence of Bui Tru, the second secretary of the embassy of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in the DDR (July 1972).

The Path to Large-Scale Agricultural Production

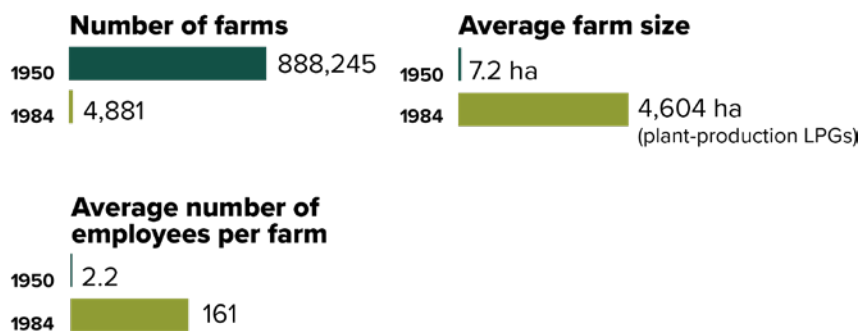
In the late 1960s, when land reform had been fully implemented and the cooperative movement had reached its height, a third central phase of agricultural development began. During this phase, strategic goals were established that would guide agricultural planning until the beginning of the 1980s: the consolidation of small- and mid-sized farms into larger cooperatives, specialisation in parts of the production process, and collaboration with processing industries as prerequisites for large-scale industrial-like production in the countryside. Hans Reichelt, long-time minister of agriculture, explained the necessity of industrial agricultural production under the conditions of a socialist society:

This was the path towards creating larger economic units in agriculture – small-scale farming is as ineffective as keeping livestock in small stables. Some may object here: ‘Yikes, large-scale livestock farming!’ But industrial-like production in agriculture is not bad *per se*. It is objectively necessary to feed humanity – this is not possible with nineteenth-century production methods. What is bad is when all moral and ethical rules, including animal welfare, are ignored for the sake of profit. However, this stems from the character of the society. When corporate wholesale buyers force farmers to sell their produce below the production price, and when shareholders and banks speculate with food on

the stock exchanges, this inevitably has an impact on production.⁶¹

As a result of the increased investment capacities and efficiency that came with years of accumulated experience in cooperative-style production, all LPGs gradually developed into Type III LPGs (the most advanced cooperative structure, through which farmers incorporated all of their land and homestead into the cooperative, which functioned as an independent enterprise). Through a 1963 decree of the Council of Ministers, most MTS machinery was handed over to the Type III LPGs free of charge while the Type I and Type II LPGs were able to purchase it at a low price and in instalments.⁶² Many MTS workers, tractor drivers, and technicians became members of cooperatives. This meant that the use of technology could be coordinated more effectively and integrated into the work of LPGs. Finally, LPGs also merged to form larger 'joint LPGs'. The total number of cooperatives decreased, while the agricultural area farmed by each cooperative increased. Where previously there were 19,313 LPGs working roughly 5.4 million hectares of land in 1960, in 1988 3,855 LPGs worked the same amount of land.⁶³

Changes in Farm Structure, 1950–1984



Data from a collective of authors, *40 Jahre erfolgreiche Entwicklung zu einer leistungsfähigen sozialistischen Landwirtschaft in der DDR* [40 Years of Successful Development Towards Efficient Socialist Agriculture in the DDR] (Eggersdorf: agrabuch, 1989), 58.

This increase in agricultural productivity was driven by the need to meet the growing demand for food and raw materials, which were necessary inputs in a number of industries, such as the textile, leather and fur, pulp and paper, chemical and pharmaceutical, woodworking, and cultural industries. In 1988, almost 65% of the DDR's primary raw materials were produced in the agricultural sector.⁶⁴ This increase in agricultural productivity also freed up urgently needed labour that could be deployed to other sectors of the economy; promoted the efficient use of agricultural machinery; and created the conditions to increase the level of training that farmers and agricultural workers received – all factors that in turn further increased productivity.



Image 23. Specialists Klaus Ulrich and Franz Mally check a computer-controlled irrigation system in an LPG in Dambeck.



Image 24. Workers use a combine harvester in an LPG in Werben.

Agricultural planning took place at the central, local, and farm levels. Until then, LPGs had been relatively self-contained, now they become increasingly integrated into the overall social planning and management of the DDR's economy. The Agricultural-Industrial Associations (Agrar-Industrie-Vereinigungen, AIVs) that emerged in the mid-1970s were the culmination of this process. AIVs were an institutionalised form of cooperation between various LPGs, Publicly Owned Estates, inter-enterprise facilities used by more than one organisation also known by their German acronym VEGs, and the upstream and downstream enterprises in the service, processing, and manufacturing sectors. By 1989, thirteen such production complexes (AIVs) had formed in the DDR, which together farmed 6.6% of the DDR's total agricultural land.⁶⁵

By the early 1980s, concrete problems arising from the trend towards specialisation and excesses in large-scale production led to course corrections and debates. For example, the specialisation and separation of plant and animal production disrupted the direct exchange of natural fertiliser and animal feed and led to logistical difficulties. Increased transport expenditures and costs for large estates strained production. In animal production, the effort to tend to veterinary hygiene and disease prevention noticeably increased. Ecological issues caused by the excessive use of mineral fertilisers rather than environmentally friendlier options were corrected over time. Energy-intensive machine systems were susceptible to energy price spikes on the global market, which had a particularly severe impact on the DDR, especially in the beginning of the 1980s.

The effort to improve the integration of LPGs into the DDR's social and economic plans through AIVs did not signal a plan to change the ownership structure of the land. As an official information brochure on agriculture explained:

Time and again, visitors to our republic ask if and when land will be nationalised. This question is not on the table, because nobody is thinking of changing the forms of property in the countryside. Most of the land is the private property of the farmers. Its cooperative use, and the distribution of its yield to the LPG members according to their share of the work performed, creates every opportunity to further advance the [DDR's] developed socialist society.⁶⁶

Though private ownership undoubtedly had an influence on the consciousness of individual farmers, on the whole, the increasing integration of the LPGs into the unitary structures of economic planning and democracy in the DDR prevented private land ownership from developing economic or political significance. The relationship between the different actors in rural areas and agricultural production was not without friction. As Klaus Schmidt, former director of the DDR's Institute for Agro-economics, pointed out:

Particularly where the AIVs managed the territory of an entire municipality or where their sphere of influence even extended beyond the municipality's boundaries, there was a tendency for them to increasingly take on the official duties that had hitherto been managed by state organs. A fundamental problem that arose with the development of the AIVs was the question of the prospects and opportunities of individual units within the AIV, specifically to what extent they could maintain their independence.⁶⁷

Such contradictions and problems, alongside the misguided separation of plant and animal production in the 1970s, should have resulted in lively debate about the future of agriculture. The issue of balancing land ownership and independence with the further integration and centralisation of LPGs would certainly have remained the subject of political debate had the DDR continued to exist. As long as the SED and the wide-ranging democratic structures in rural areas – from the agricultural councils from the municipal to central levels to the farmers' organisations, and numerous scientific institutions and agriculture publications of the time – responded to these contradictions and tasks in an agile, self-critical and proactive manner, they were able to drive development forward.

5. Conclusion

The development of socialist agricultural relations was brought to an abrupt end with the dissolution of the DDR in October 1990. Structural changes were imposed at breakneck speed, transforming the social and economic reality of farmers.

At the time of the DDR's dissolution, 55% of the land cultivated by the LPGs was owned by individual LPG members. The remaining 45% was owned by the state or leased to the LPG by private owners. After 1990, this 45% was rapidly privatised, removing land from the LPGs' existing economic structures and providing a lever for their dissolution in favour of private farming. LPGs seeking to continue to produce had to lease or purchase this land, often at additional cost, while completing the transition to a new legal form used for cooperatives in the West by the end of 1991. The transformation process placed considerable pressure on existing LPG structures.⁶⁸

This and other policy shifts in the post-1990 period created a rural exodus, especially of young and qualified workers. Of the former 923,000 agricultural workers in the DDR, 743,900 were laid off by 1993 and 4 out of 5 were pushed to leave the countryside.⁶⁹ The social and cultural infrastructure was destroyed. Although the transformation in land ownership established by land reform was legally protected by the so-called reunification treaties signed by the last DDR government, the landowning elite that had controlled the countryside before 1945 was able to use loopholes to reclaim parts of their expropriated land.

Yet, despite the radical capitalist turnaround, the history of the DDR has left a visible mark on agricultural structures in Germany. On average, farms in East Germany cultivate much larger areas than those in West Germany and have maintained elements of the structures established by LPGs, such as machine sharing under the new legal categories of the market economy.⁷⁰

In less than fifty years, revolutionary ruptures in the living and economic relations of the countryside were seen in East Germany, from the remnants of a semi-feudal, hierarchical social and property order to a collective way of working and living based on cooperation. The land reform that began in 1945 created the conditions for the transformation in the countryside and the dismantling of the political and economic monopoly of the landowning classes. Only by ending their rule was it possible to establish and develop new economic and social relations in East Germany. With the expropriation of the large Junker estates, land reform in the DDR ended the rule of the feudal aristocracy and agrarian capitalist classes. Agricultural workers, landless and smallholder peasants, and the general village population were liberated from the system of economic exploitation and semi-feudal disenfranchisement that had been in place for centuries. Under the conditions created by the reality of Soviet occupation after the Second World War and the leadership of the workers' movement and parties, land reform was achieved in this

part of Germany, and the oppressed became the protagonists shaping agriculture and village life.

The phase of collectivisation in the post-war years (approximately 1952–1960) illustrates the complexity of social development when a change in the thinking of those involved is crucial to its success. The SED had to manoeuvre between the strategic goals of socialist construction and the adverse conditions on the ground. Between retreat and advance, external and internal contradictions, and the necessities and prospects of economic development, the SED constantly reassessed the speed and force of its leadership in this comprehensive development process.

The complexity of the path to socialism, the protracted nature of some processes, especially in people's consciousness, and the influence and sabotage of political opponents had to be taken into account and counteracted. This required agility and clarity of purpose, but also the ability to be self-critical, which the political leadership generally demonstrated over long periods of time.

While social hardship and individual cases of injustice cannot be denied, it is necessary to understand such instances in the contradictory and complex context of post-war East Germany and to understand that they represent exceptions, not the rule. Without the leading role of the peasantry, the transition towards cooperatives would have failed. Naturally, from the bourgeois perspective, the transition away from the dominance of private property is to be condemned on principle. Narratives of 'forced collectivisation' that dominate the public discourse in Germany today do not seek to understand the processes in the DDR but rather to promote anti-communist prejudices. Individual fates, in which there were also tragic conflicts and entanglements, are used to obscure the view of the broader development and prevent a serious examination based on historical facts. This method of framing can be seen over and over in narratives about socialist states.

Cooperative forms of agricultural production were a cornerstone of East Germany and a decisive building block for the development of the DDR as a socialist state. Existential financial angst, which is inevitable under the 'freedom' of private property and competition, was overcome in the DDR through mutual aid among peasants and their integration into state planning. While some see the continued existence of cooperative ownership alongside state ownership as a major obstacle to the deepening of planned economic relations, this was not the case in the DDR. The experiences of the AIVs certainly pointed to contradictions between the different forms of ownership that needed to be resolved, but the cooperatives were already deeply integrated into the overall economic processes of the DDR through jointly developed plans and thus binding agreements on the distribution of funds as well as the fixed-price system. While the LPGs could exercise some economic autonomy regarding their internal workings, there would be no significant effect of these autonomous decisions on the broader economy.

The cooperative way of thinking, working, and living in the DDR democratised the villages by eroding social hierarchies, expanding leisure

time, and promoting extensive opportunities for cultural, sporting, and social activities. Cultural centres, kindergartens, village stores, cafeterias, comprehensive medical care, continuing education opportunities, vacation sites, sports teams, music groups, and much more were an integral part of village and community infrastructure. It was the rural population itself that played a key role in building these structures and sustaining them.

The DDR was largely able to produce its own agricultural products, and hunger and poverty became things of the past. Today, in view of soaring rates of global hunger, the omnipresent overexploitation of nature, and the market dominance of agricultural multinational corporations, some political movements seek the solution in small-scale production. The DDR followed a different path, which – despite a decreasing workforce – was able to avoid the negative effects of capitalist farming while increasing yields by industrialising large-scale agricultural production on the basis of socialist relations.

The abrupt termination of this project in 1990 and the developments in the years since elucidate the essential characteristics of capitalist transformation: privatisation, the dismantling of ‘unprofitable’ social and cultural infrastructure, land speculation, and rural exodus. Farmers had and still have to fight their own way through the chaos of liquidation, privatisation, and fierce competition, pitted against a constructed false enemy/scapegoat of ‘cheap’ labour provided mostly by migrants.

The dismantling of socialist infrastructure in the countryside furthered the tendency towards isolation among rural populations. While the renewed reign of private property postured itself as offering increased freedom of choice to farmers, this ‘freedom’ is inherently limited by constraints of the market and comes at the expense of farmers’ roles as co-creators of society. Along with it came a new rule of order: profit as the determining factor in agriculture. While the conditions today differ greatly from those in 1945, the slogan ‘The land to those who work it’ is yet again on the agenda in East Germany and across the world.

Notes

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